

CHAPTER 5: FEMINIST RESPONSES TO THE PROBLEM OF SEX

5.1 INTRODUCTION

Feminists take seriously the question of sexuality. They also take seriously the social construction of women's bodies and how these constructions are used to control women's lives. Sexuality is a major issue because for many feminists "sexuality is at the heart of male domination" (Richardson in Robinson and Richardson 1997: 152) of women and becomes a regulatory norm "which qualifies a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility" (Butler in Chopp and Davaney 1997: 246). Feminists therefore challenge the traditional assumptions about sexuality, deconstruct sexual myths and beliefs and propose new and unique ways of understanding sexuality. Overcoming the Christian heritage still prevalent in much of the constructed reality is a task feminist theologians take to heart. Lisa Isherwood (2000: 21) sees the reconstruction of religion as a circle that needs to be broken so as to re-establish religions as "powerful forces in freeing us from the bodily constraints that they largely helped to construct and have continued unquestioningly to believe".

5.2 TAKING CONTROL: TOWARDS THE LIBERATION OF WOMEN

Karen Armstrong (1986) verbalises the loneliness and exclusion that women experience because of their omission from the male world. "Men have told many terrible stories about women's sexuality during the last two thousand years" (*Ibid*: 66). Women shrink from discussing the positive elements of their sexuality, because they regard it as private and personal. "However as long as we concentrate on negatively restricting our discussion of female sexuality and what is wrong and unnatural, we are continuing the long tradition of sexual fear and intolerance imposed by men on our society" (*Ibid*: 67). Women's sexual education is lacking because it is generally confined to the functions of reproduction rather than the concept of pleasure. Paula Webster (quoted in Armstrong 1986: 67) calls our mothers "sexually mute and mysterious", leaving women without any real knowledge of sexuality and without an erotic heritage. Karen Armstrong posits that

females need to take possession of their own sexuality and define it in healthy positive ways. This deconstruction of patriarchal and Christian myths will liberate women and men to explore a new and healthy sexuality.

5.3 MONOSEXUALITY: EROTIC CELIBACY AS CHOICE

The research undertaken yielded the following interesting phenomenon: masturbation was indicated as an issue in the preliminary research, but many black young adult women describe it as disgusting, as something they will never do and as a taboo.

Feminist theologians hold that masturbation, or to use the preferred term *erotic celibacy*, is an acceptable alternative for expressing sexual feelings. Christina Landman (2003a: 23) gives two reasons for practicing erotic celibacy. Firstly, owing to the male/female ratio worldwide, a third of womankind does not have access to marital sexual relationships. Secondly, many women prefer to remain single due to the abusiveness and violence associated with relationships – a heterosexual relationship in the patriarchal context simply does not have any appeal. Erotic celibacy therefore implies “remaining celibate, while respecting the need of one’s body for passion and loving care” (*Ibid*: 23).

According to Lisa Isherwood (2000: 158) erotic celibacy combines the personal, social, political and spiritual. She feels that Christology must be based in the erotic, because that would encourage “passionate commitment to the world rather than a suspicion of the flesh and a cautious connection with the world” (*Ibid*: 158). Carter Heyward (quoted in Isherwood 2000: 158) feels that erotic power is a divine birthright that forces us into full and embodied relationality with others and the world. This force is greater than the narrowness of genital sexuality, and an active movement towards the divine. She emphasises the empowerment of the erotic, which should inevitably and necessarily lead to “full eroticization in mutuality” (Carter in Nelson and Longfellow 1994: 142).

Lisa Isherwood (2000: 159) defines erotic celibacy as a removal from inequality; she sees the body as a place of metanoia where alternate realities can

be experienced and where male power is purposely and actively resisted. She further feels that young women need “to develop a joyful relationship with their own bodies and masturbation then seems to be the place to begin building up the kind of self love and self esteem that will be a critique of patriarchy” (*Ibid*: 160). Women need to embrace their sexuality in empowered ways, which will ultimately waylay the onslaught of consumerism, violence and objectification. Partner relationships will then be face to face, not based on distorted images of each other.

The power of erotic celibacy lies in a new understanding of “mutuality, imagination and selfhood, in the beauty of female passion and a sexual reminder of radical incarnationism” (*Ibid*: 162 – 163). The deconstruction of the myth that the submissive female can only receive sex in a heterosexual relationship, has opened new possibilities for sexual pleasure. Many women prefer erotic celibacy, “thus shattering the myth of the frigid, nonorgasmic female dependent on the male for sexual climax” (Ellison in Nelson and Longfellow 1994: 239 – 240).

Christine Gudorf (1994) places her description of erotic celibacy within the realm of pleasure. She argues that pain and suffering can distort our humanity, while sexual pleasure can enhance our capacity to live well. She sees the following benefits for women flowing from erotic celibacy:

- It helps women acquire physical knowledge about their bodies
- It helps women to gain knowledge about the process of sexual arousal and fulfilment
- Women can gain knowledge about their own pattern of arousal (Gudorf 1994: 92).

The practice of erotic celibacy seems to lead to greater success when partnered sex does take place and actually seems to facilitate the meeting of one’s own sexual desires and needs as well as the need of the partner.

5.4 DEALING WITH SEXUAL SHAME

5.4.1 INTRODUCTION

A very interesting finding in the research is the presence of guilt feelings and shame towards sexuality amongst many young adult women. Most young women feel that sexuality is something to be hidden, and that should exposure of sexual behaviour become a reality, even greater measures should be taken to hide their sexual activities. The teachings of the Bible and the church contribute to these feelings of shamefulness and alienation. Whereas guilt feelings can be viewed as a positive reaction which can ultimately lead to change and transformation, sexual shame is negative and repressive and needs to be addressed in a compassionate manner.

5.4.2 PERPETUATION OF SEXUAL SHAME: THE SILENCE OF THE CHURCH AS A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR

Sexual shame manifests itself as a deep sense of unworthiness and disembodiment. The church perpetuates sexual shame by vague and subtle messages. The silence of the church on sexual matters has contributed to the societal crisis over sexuality. People are in dire need of guidance in sexual matters and a comprehensive sexual ethics, but the church still clings to an obsolete and unworkable sexual ethics. According to Karen McClintock (2001) biblical texts, traditional beliefs and practices, moral superiority, teaching and preaching about immorality are used to keep traditional sexual values intact.

James Nelson (cited in McClintock 2001: 11) states that young people are no longer willing to leave their sexuality behind when they enter the church. Young people experience a disembodied spirituality when they are already sexually active and the church refuses to discuss sexuality and spirituality in the context of faith. They experience this omission as hypocrisy and insincerity. Young people also leave the church in the fear of being shamed by the church for being sexually active. This observation is also supported by the research undertaken, where several young women indicate that they would rather not go to church, but they will not give up being sexually active.

The church suffers from a severe lack of open and honest discussion about sexuality. Although sexuality is very private in nature, the prevailing thoughts in society and culture influence what happens in that private space. The church is alienated in modern society because of its antiquated views on sexuality. The church is still bound to the idea that sex is only tolerable with procreation in mind, while sexual encounters take place for a variety of reasons like the desire for intimate connection and simply for the pleasure involved. The church has a rigid and immovable attitude towards any sexuality that steps outside the traditional borders, with the result that sexuality and spirituality are separated from each other. The church is neither proactive nor prepared at all to address contemporary sexual experiences. This attitude has left the church isolated and archaic in a world where people are desperately looking for moral guidance and guidelines about sexuality.

5.4.3 BANISHING SEXUAL SHAME: THE AFFIRMATION OF SEXUALITY IN THE CHRISTIAN CONTEXT

Karen McClintock (2001) notes the contribution of the church to the unhealthy sexual attitudes in society. According to her the linking of sexual activity to original sin epitomises a shaming theology. This theology has led to millennia of sexual brokenness and constrictive sexual prescriptions. Carey Ellen Walsh (2000: 49) verbalises the problem as Christian theology's devaluation and problematisation of sexuality, desire and the body as a threat to spirituality. "Religion naturally directed its energies toward the loftier domain of the spirit and abandoned the body, considering the body as the prime locus of sin. This development has to be the low watermark for understanding sexuality and it obviously still persists today". The task of the church is to rid people of the constraints of patriarchal views on sexuality and to address "sexuality from a perspective of healthy and value-centred love" (McClintock 2001: 62).

Karen McClintock (*Ibid*: 50) sees sexual intimacy as "shared power, playfulness, love, and risk-taking". Mutuality is a defining factor in healthy sexual relations. Sexuality should be addressed in a shame-free context, where the narrow, exclusivist definition of sex as genital stimulation and release should be

rejected. Talk about sexuality should focus on good sex; sex that is “communication, affection, forgiveness, honesty, vulnerability, dependability, and a sense of humour” (*Ibid*: 54). Sex also asks for love and commitment to produce “a sense of being one with self, the other, and with God” (*Ibid*: 55).

The church finds itself in an ethical dilemma about the issue of sex and cannot satisfy society’s need for a comprehensive sexual ethics with simplistic solutions, a fear of moving away from the confines of the Christian sexual tradition and the perpetuation of excessive hypocrisy on sexual matters. The view that HIV/AIDS is a curse from God is still prevalent in many churches, forcing victims into silence and shame. The polarisation of gender and male domination forces many women into disempowered relationships, with the result that women suffer sexual submission, abuse and violence – all in the Name of God.

Karen McClintock (*Ibid*) calls the church to speak up and become compassionate about sexual issues; breaking the denial, silence and shame about sexuality. Christine Gudorf (1994) finds the answer to the alienation of church and society concerning sexual issues in a regrounding of spirituality in embodiment. She finds that the repressive and masochistic notions of Christian spirituality clash with the meta-narrative of therapeutic well-being in the post-modern society. Intimate relationships contribute to healing, self-creation and perfection. She finds a challenge in the construction of “a Christian spirituality which can both do justice to the Incarnation and draw on human sexuality for the energy and vision to create and support just and loving communities” (*Ibid*: 210).

5.5 “BUT WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?”: RECONSTRUCTING WOMANHOOD IN THE BIBLE

5.5.1 INTRODUCTION

“The key concept which is pivotal in making sense of Christian sexual ethics is that of ‘complementarity’: the idea that male and female are somehow ‘made for each other’” (Webster 1995: 5). The idea of complementarity finds its origins in the creation myth in Genesis and has been imbued with a hierarchicalist meaning throughout the centuries. The New Testament liberatory proclamation in Galatians

3: 28 that in Jesus Christ there is no longer male nor female, has not managed to override the creation myth with its mysteries of sexuality and sin. The household codes in the New Testament have similarly managed to subjugate women with the flawed idea that men have exclusive prerogatives over women. The exegesis of the Genesis-myth and the household codes has previously mainly been carried out by men. The deconstruction and exegesis of these texts by female scholars is vital for the restoration of full womanhood.

5.5.2 RECONSTRUCTING THE CREATION MYTH

The creation myths that God created women second and therefore in a secondary position and created women as conscious seducers, has persisted over centuries to denigrate women into secondary, submissive positions (Landman 2003b: 4,8). Phyllis Trible (in Clifford 2002: 66 – 70) applies a hermeneutic of suspicion and remembrance in her classic exegesis of the creation story. She abhors the androcentric interpretations of Eve's story that have acquired canonical status. She posits that the patriarchal interpretation of *âdâm* as Adam/man has been used incorrectly and should rather read the *creature from the earth*. At creation this creature is sexually undefined, because the biblical text does not refer to Adam as man until woman is taken from him. God notices the loneliness and incompleteness of this earth creature and thus creates two beings to be suitable companions for each other. The consequence is an egalitarian relationship between male and female. Male and female both originate from God's agency, with the female completing the creation of the human species. This simultaneous creation of female/male means that the male does not precede the female in rank or time. The words "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh" (Gen 2: 23) depict the equality, mutuality, unity and solidarity of male and female as one flesh. "The creation of human sexuality represents the high point of the story. It signals the movement from isolation and loneliness to companionship and partnership" (*Ibid*: 69). When sin destroyed the harmony and mutuality in this partnership, Eve and Adam were thrown into the discord and alienation of patriarchy.

Phyllis Trible also deconstructs the word *helper* that has subjugated women to be subordinates and slaves of men. The word *ezer* is used in the Old Testament

to refer to God's role as helper of Israel. As God is certainly not subordinate to humans, so Eve is not subordinate to Adam. The word designates a beneficial relationship, without a suggestion of subordination and inequality of roles.

5.5.3 RECONSTRUCTING THE HOUSEHOLD CODES WITH SPECIFIC REFERENCE TO EPHESIANS AND COLOSSIANS

According to Rebecca Groothuis (2000: 121) traditionalist interpretations see the New Testament texts on gender roles as "direct, unequivocal, transcultural statements of a God-ordained principle of man's authority and the woman's subordinate domesticity". The so-called household codes have played a formative role in the silencing and marginalising of women. Feminist theologians therefore have a vested interest in deconstructing and reconstructing these passages.

Sarah Tanzer (in Schüssler Fiorenza 1994: 331) points out that Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza argues that the process of patriarchalisation was not yet complete at the end of the second century and that the household codes served a double purpose: firstly to christianise the patriarchal Aristotelian ethics and secondly to institutionalise submission and obedience. In the light of this perspicacity, Tanzer argues that the household code in Ephesians is a later addition to the original text. She bases her argument on the fact that the first three chapters of Ephesians advocate equality, through Christ, of Jew and Gentile and the last three chapters teach an ethics and praxis of equality. In this context of liberation and equality Ephesians 5: 22 – 6: 9 appears: the re-establishment of hierarchical borders. This later addition builds on the themes and language of Ephesians but gives a different twist to those themes. This addition makes it difficult to construct a feminist critical judgement of Ephesians as a whole; the focus normally being on the household codes contained within the text.

Louise Kretzschmar and Annalet van Schalkwyk (Kretzschmar and Van Schalkwyk 2002: 76) posit that Ephesians 5 verse 21 forms an integral part in the exposition of the following verses. They refer to the Greek word *hypotassomenoi*, which means *I subordinate myself*. This subordination refers to the obedience and submission of all Christians to Christ, "submission to each other within the church

or marriage are [sic] to be governed by the character and will of Christ as revealed in the gospels". They concur with Stanley Grenz (*Ibid*: 77) that mutual submission is the guiding principle in these texts. Marriage is the specific application of the self sacrifice of both partners and the setting aside of individual prerogatives for the sake of the other.

Rebecca Groothuis (2000: 152) agrees with Louise Kretzschmar and Annalet van Schalkwyk on the argument for mutual submission. The purported headship of the man over his wife in Ephesians 3: 21 -33 is a "life-giving, self-giving love, which is analogous to the role of Christ as Saviour of his body, the church". The head-body metaphor has unfortunately provoked a hierarchical predominance of the male over the female, instead of a life-giving, reciprocal and unified head/body organism. Jesus repudiated the authoritarian rule of one person over the other, and taught that the Christlike way is the way of submission. Submission is thus never to be unilateral, but a mutual submission characterised by reciprocal love, growth, fidelity and liberation.

Both Mary Rose D'Angelo (in Schüssler Fiorenza 1994: 313) and Nicholas King (1998) hold that Colossians deals with a "thoroughly patriarchal view of society" (*Ibid*: 170). According to Mary Rose D'Angelo Colossians is the earliest surviving letter written in the name of Paul and also the earliest canonical work to use the household codes. This letter professes the equality of all, but is simultaneously concerned with the subjugation of women and slaves. D'Angelo holds a stringent view of the context and use of Colossians:

... Colossians is a step toward a Christianity that became increasingly restrictive and even abusive for women, children, and slaves; the authority of the Household Codes long endorsed both slavery and battering, and Colossians' theology helped to christianize social patterns of domination and subordination. The codes should be read liturgically or cited as scripture only to be challenged. But no portion of Colossians can be read "as the Word of God" as if it were detached from the Household Codes, or from the cosmic vision and theological rationale that undergird them. Nor can the problems of its theology and history be addressed by excising Colossians from the canon, or from Christian memory. The

transformations it began must be held in memory as true if painful inheritances from the common origins of Christians.

(D'Angelo in Schüssler Fiorenza 1994: 323)

Other feminists reconstruct the restrictions of the household codes in the love and redemption of Christ. Christina Landman (2003b: 1540) states that the house codes of Colossians differ radically from the context of the early Christian community. The relationship between husband and wife is established by the redemptive relationship between God/Jesus and the church. This relationship is characterised by mutual love and respect. Fran Porter (2002) concurs that a patriarchal reading of the household codes is passé and that it should portray mutuality in relationships, where women have parity with men. Redemption in Christ “offers the possibility of restoring the original non-hierarchical way of relating between the sexes” (*Ibid*: 136).

5.6 LISTENING TO A WOMAN'S VOICE ON LOVE AND SEX: THE SONG OF SONGS

The Old Testament book Song of Songs is unashamedly an erotic book in which a female voice is discernible. This unique book is “an anthology of secular, non-matrimonial love lyrics, erotic and outspoken” (Brenner in Soskice and Lipton 2003: 165). This book celebrates God's creation of love and sexuality. “The love described here springs out of our human nature but is very much connected to the heart of God. Sensual love as well as love of God contains mystery, wonder, and deep joy” (McClintock 2001: 60). The female voice predominates in this book, providing an unmediated female voice, female perspectives and female imagery. The Song of Songs offers “a glorious celebration of human sexual desire and bodiliness for its own sake” (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 52).

Because a literal interpretation of the Song of Songs did not fit into the prevailing patriarchal views of sexuality in ancient times, a theological-allegorical exegesis was attached to it. Some feminists still read the Song of Songs allegorically. Phyllis Tribble sees the Song of Songs as a corrective of the Garden of Eden, while other feminist theologians support the egalitarian mutuality and

gender equality that underlie the literary interpretation (Brenner *Ibid*: 165 – 166). In contrast Carey Ellen Walsh views the Song of Songs as a book of desire and a celebration of sexual yearning and disparages scholars who see the book as “a feminist tour de force or paean to gender mutuality” (2000: 139). Gender equality or gender inversion is not the central theme in this book, but rather the idea of embodied desire that “courses in and through the body, male and female, and arches beyond bodily, even sexual limits” (*Ibid*: 140).

The central figure in the Song of Solomon is a young Shulammite woman. She is the embodiment of joyful and celebratory erotic pleasure. She is assertive and apparently takes the initiative in the relationship and sexual encounters (Meyers 2000: 311). Christina Landman (1999b: 11) puts forward the notion that this assertive woman frees modern women to talk about their sexuality and sexual fantasies. The Song of Songs is a bold affirmation and assertion of human sexuality. The predominant androcentric bias in the Bible is absent here; a female voice challenges that bias and serves as a corrective of the distorted picture of female sexuality.

The images of sexuality and sensuality present in the Song of Songs contrast totally with the image of male dominated penetrative sex. The consummation of sex is put on hold and the yearning and longing for sexual union is described. The women’s desire and arousal spiral through the pages of this intense sexual book. This book describes longing and lust and “lays bare desire’s impact on the individual and probes its complexity as a force in life” (Walsh 2000: 2). It holds that desire encompasses emotions and is a response to the joy life offers. It shatters the idea of procreationism and places sexual desire in the realm of the desire for a whole, good life. Instead of viewing female sexuality as a symbol of sin, sex and death, the Song of Songs asserts exquisite desire, the autonomy of sexuality and the undistorted affirmation of human sexuality.

5.7 BODY THEOLOGY: AFFIRMING EMBODIMENT

5.7.1 INTRODUCTION

Body theology is a diverse theology which can only attempt to supply partial answers to the problem of sex. The field of sexuality is wrought with dichotomies and ambiguities, which compounds the diversity of a theology of the body.

Body theology is a development aimed at addressing and deconstructing the imprisonment of the body under oppressive systems as well as the devastating confinements of patriarchy. Body theology epistemologically centres embodied subjectivity and undermines rationality, which is the patriarchal norm.

5.7.2 DECONSTRUCTING THE PATRIARCHAL DEFINITIONS OF FEMALE SEXUAL DESIRE

Female desire has been dictated by male desire and male fear (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 23). The traditional views of sexuality, especially the missionary position in sexual intercourse, focus on dominance and submission. Body learning ultimately defines a woman's societal position "and we are still being encouraged to learn the age old patriarchal narrative, 'be fucked, be joyful and be silent'" (*Ibid*: 25). Body theology challenges patriarchal discourses, the eroticisation of female suppression and dares women to be sexual outside the borders of power. Body theology critiques the appropriation of female bodies and explores a model of mutuality between equal partners. The enjoyment of a body for its own sake, defies patriarchal borders and exclusive sexuality. Women must be framed by their bodies and not by culture or doctrine. Patriarchal discourse often forces women to "discipline themselves to fit a model of sexuality which prioritizes male desire and defines their own fulfilment in terms of love and giving pleasure and this self-giving is encouraged in Christianity" (*Ibid*: 28). Monogamous marriage supports the issue of ownership and complementarity and is used to keep hierarchical relationships in place.

5.7.3 RECONSTRUCTING FEMALE BODIES

Body theology takes seriously the concept of women's bodies as a site for resistance. Body theology resists the male bias in religion and reacts to human embodiment as definitive expression in the bodies of men (Ross in Parsons 2002: 233). Sharon Bong (in Soskice and Lipton 2003: 356) remarks that a "theology that matters is one that is embodied". This statement critiques a disembodied Christianity and especially the disembodied female body found in Christianity. Throughout the ages, the Christian denial of bodies was an attempt to reach spiritual perfection. Body theology places bodies at the centre of theological reflection. This reflection starts in reality and experience, where the body becomes a site of revelation. A theology of eternal absolutes is totally alienated from a praxis that is continually fluid and expansive. Body theology must therefore liberate the changing, submissive bodies that patriarchy juxtaposed with the static eternal truths and an unchangeable god of law (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 81).

Body theology develops the deconstruction of a patriarchal society and a patriarchal God. Feminists work through the body, think through the body and heal through the body. Body theology attempts to liberate and integrate bodies and strives to "develop a sexual ethic that takes seriously the desire of all and integrates it into a mutual and freeing celebration of embodiment" (*ibid*: 32). Body theology posits that only when the body is freed from patriarchal restrictions, can creation understand the liberative power of incarnation.

5.7.4 A POWERFUL FORCE: THE EROTIC AND EMBODIMENT

Erotic power is seen by some feminists as a deep transformative power within us; it transcends genital sexual expression and signifies our deep desire for union with others. Carter Heyward (Isherwood and Stuart 1998: 46) sees eroticism as our deepest desire to find justice. Lisa Isherwood (in Isherwood and McEwan 1996: 53) contends that *eros* is often equated with lust, but the erotic is more than that – it is always grounded in mutuality and empowerment. It transgresses the narrow definition of power over others and relates to the other and the universe in a sensual connection.

Audre Lorde contends in her famous essay *Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power* (in Nelson and Longfellow 1994: 75) that erotic power is a “replenishing and provocative force”: a force that asserts the life-force of women and a force that empowers creative energy (*Ibid*: 77). This force is self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal and anti-erotic society (*Ibid*: 79). Lisa Isherwood (2000: 32) reiterates Heyward Carter’s view of erotic power as a creative and transformative force. When we claim this force, we claim the right to “live from a level of mutuality and connectedness that is truly revolutionary and world changing. We are filled with passion/desire which is body based and justice seeking”.

Alison Webster (1995) issues a word of warning against the inclination to make the erotic a privileged signifier of who we are. While some feminist theologians are excited about deliberating about God and the power of the erotic, others are not: “the language of the erotic is noticeably missing in the theological construction of Afro-American women, and feminist theologians from other parts of the world find it difficult to speak about the power of female sexuality” (*Ibid*: 191).